

Matter of Fact . . . • By Joseph Alsop

A Debt Is Owed

IN THE LAST three years, the true shape of the world we live in has been radically changed by a new fact which very few people know about even today.

The fact is that we now know the true nature of the power balance between this country and the Soviet Union. Despite its closed society, the Soviet Union is now open to inspection—in the most literal sense. We could only guess before; but since August, 1960, we have known.

This is a change incomparably profound and far-reaching. It is also an incalculable triumph for the United States. It first had to be pointed out now because the man to whom this change and gain are largely owed is now leaving the public service, uncelebrated, unrewarded, almost unthanked.

IF ANY MEMBER of the general public recalls the name of Richard M. Bissell, it will probably be because of the Bay of Pigs. Before that fiasco, Bissell was due to succeed Allen Dulles as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. But someone had to take the rap for this sorry failure, for which everybody from President Kennedy on down had a share of blame; and Bissell was chief among those who took the rap.

Another job followed—a fairly big job, but one that is now ending for reasons that are not especially relevant. All that is relevant, at the moment, is to record just how the closed Soviet society used to be closed for all practical purposes.

This remarkable story began in the summer of 1954 when, at President Eisenhower's insistence, a special ad-

visory committee, the Killian committee on surprise attack suggested building a reconnaissance plane of the type of the U-2. Such a plane had already been proposed to the Air Force by the brilliant Kelly Johnson of Lockheed Aviation, but the idea had been turned down flat.

By the intricate, half-accidental processes familiar in Government, the Killian committee recommendation brought together a three-star team, composed of Kelly Johnson, the famous E. H. Land of the Polaroid Co., and Bissell from the CIA, who was the friend of both the others.

In record time, these three built the U-2 through from concept to reality. The strange new aircraft was thereupon assigned to the CIA. Bissell thus became commander of an independent U-2 air force, in addition to his other duties.

So much is fairly well known to informed persons. What is not well known (and would not be discussed in this space if the main facts had not already been published elsewhere) is the second chapter of the story that opened with the U-2.

BECAUSE the intervals between U-2 flights were unavoidably long, and for other technical reasons as well, the U-2 did no more than open a small chink in the Iron Curtain. Contrary to what many imagine, the U-2 did not really replace guesses about the Soviet Union with true knowledge.

Yet the new plane's success was very great, all the same. And this success in turn directed attention to the reconnaissance satellite project previously initiated by the Air Force Research and Development Command.

From this public project, round them rather timidly proceeded a church which was quite as the CIA itself, but one of a different kind. And an ad-

out secret effort to build a workable reconnaissance satellite began.

This time Lt. Gen. Bernard Schriever of the Research and Development Command worked with Bissell. Brig. Gen. Oswald Ridland was Bissell's day-to-day partner. "Din" Land again lent a hand. And others might be mentioned.

Yet in the official Air Force account of this matter, the main credit for the success of the reconnaissance satellite is nonetheless given to Bissell. August, 1960, when the first of the new "birds" with seeing, remembering eyes made its successful flight, is a date that will be remembered in history books.

IT IS A DATE with much bearing, to begin with, on the still controversy about the missile gap. Until we knew the Soviets had not deployed the intercontinental ballistic missiles that they were entirely capable of producing, the only safe course was to assume that the Soviets were indeed producing and deploying those ultimate weapons. Their failure to do so was in fact a gigantic error.

But after August, 1960, we began to know that the ICBMs were not there; and this in turn changed the entire strategic aspect of the world by the time President Kennedy took office. No historian or analyst can compute what this true knowledge has since been worth, in the desperate days of the second Cuban crisis, for instance, or much earlier, when Khrushchev at Vienna threatened a big war over Berlin.

Such, then, is the debt owed to Dick Bissell. As he happens to be this reporter's oldest friend, the debt is here acknowledged with pride. But every thinking American will surely wish to say "Thank you and good luck" to this extraordinary public servant who is now returning to private life.

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